DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 250 948 FL 014 705

AUTHOR Sigman, Stuart J.
TITLE Some Notes on Conversational Fission. Sociolinguistic Working Paper Number 91.
INSTITUTION Southwest Educational Development Lab., Austin, Tex.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Nov 81
NOTE 13p.; For other titles in this series, see FL 014 699-704 and FL 014 707.
AVAILABLE FROM Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 211 East 7th St., Austin, TX 78701.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Dialogs (Language); *Discourse Analysis; *Discussion; *Group Dynamics; *Interpersonal Communication; Sociocultural Patterns; Sociolinguistics
IDENTIFIERS *Conversation; *Turn Taking

ABSTRACT

While most previous research has implied or assumed that the conversational structure giving each speaker a turn to speak is universally normative, findings of one study suggest that in interactions with at least four participants, alternatives to this rule are possible. A phenomenon called "conversational fission" occurs when a four- (or more) person conversation departs from the one-person-one-turn format and two or more subconversations occur, allocating multiple speaker and multiple listener roles. This pattern is illustrated in a six-person conversation, both in speech and in body, head, and eye movements. At some point, two or more participants may self-select to speak simultaneously, and the situation is either repaired by one or more speakers becoming silent, or becomes two or more simultaneous conversations. This initial simultaneous talk may be an invitation to fission and may also involve a search by the simultaneous speakers for an available subgroup of listeners. The dyadic turn-taking model should be revised to account for turns taken simultaneously in non dyadic conversations, a multi systemic interaction pattern. This pattern also argues against the assumption of verbal hegemony in interaction with the related consideration that the right to speak is inherently limited rather than interactionally controlled and negotiated. (Author/MSE)

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SOME NOTES ON CONVERSATIONAL FISSION

by
Stuart J. Sigman
West Virginia University

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Sociolinguistic Working Paper
NUMBER 91

November, 1981
Southwest Educational Development Laboratory
211 East Seventh Street
Austin, Texas

FL014 705

Some Notes on Conversational Fission

Stuart J. Sigman
West Virginia University

This brief note is based on continuing research on patterns of non-dyadic turn-taking which are discussed in a lengthier, unpublished report (Sigman, 1980). The phenomenon I wish to describe is "conversational fission," which is defined as the reorganization of a conversation regulated by a one-person-at-a-time turn-taking rule into one characterized by the employment of multiple turn-exchange systems. Fission is said to occur when a conversation involving at least four participatns "breaks down" momentarily, i.e., the one-person-one-turn format is relinquished and two (or more) subconversations transpire. Sacks, et al. suggest the term "schism" for a process similar to the one described herein. "There are mechanisms for the schism of one conversation into more than one conversation. These mechanisms can operate when at least four parties are present, since then there are enough parties for two conversations. With four parties, then, schism is a systematic possibility" (1974: 713).

The findings of the present research suggest that, indeed, in interactions with at least four speaker/hearers, alternatives to the one-turn-at-a-time rule for structuring conversations are possible. These data thus extend current thinking on the organizational features of interaction, specifically by arguing against the application of dyadic research to multi-participant conversation (cf. Duncan, 1972; Sacks, et al. 1974; Wiemann and Knapp, 1975).

Most previous research has implied or assumed that the one-turn structure is universally normative. Duncan writes, for example: "Just as it is desirable to avoid bumping into people on the street, it is desirable to avoid in conversations an inordinate amount of simultaneous talk. Beyond considerations of etiquette it is difficult to maintain adequate mutual comprehensibility when participants in a conversation are talking at the same time" (1972: 283). This suggestion is echoed in the turn-taking research of Sacks, et al. (1974) and of Wiemann and Knapp (1975). Sacks and his colleagues write that interruptions are violations and require repair mechanisms. ". . . If two parties find themselves talking

at the same time one of them will stop prematurely, thus repairing the trouble" (1974: 701). Wiemann and Knapp note that "the absence of simultaneous turns (i.e., both participants in the conversation claiming the speaking turn at the same time) during the exchange of speaking roles is considered a successful exchange" (1975: 79).

Despite these suggestions, this paper indicates that interactants do manage simultaneous talking turns through the appropriate fission behavior, and that the allocation of multiple listener and multiple speaker roles may be an alternative to the one-turn format otherwise available to participants.

I will provide one extended analysis and then a summary statement of the research. The example I am concerned with occurs two minutes into the interaction:*

39
27
22
16
11
1

23
Barry: ...the conference may come
off at Temple, it may
40
(yet), nobody knows
ALL: (laughter)
STEPHEN: They still don't know?
28
MARSHA: (When will they know?)

*The data for this research are taken from the video-taped interaction of a six-member research group. Transcription conventions follow those of Gail Jefferson. Numbers above the dialogue represent participants' visual behavior and are keyed to the eye gaze listing at the end of the verbal transcript.

BARRY: Next week, they're going to know, next week, whether they're going to do it or not

29
MARSHA Did you hear Betty * 12a 12b

17
got all the applications forms in the mail?

2
HOWARD: You mean the whole conference
STEPHEN:

13
3
or just

BETTY: =Again! **

STEPHEN: The Temple conference

BARRY: Yeah, I know ( )

HOWARD: (That I know)

BETTY: Yeah, a second set

30
24 41
BARRY: You'll probably get them a few more times

BETTY: Yeah

STEPHEN: No, no ( )

BARRY: Um, but they don't know (whether it's going to happen

42
18
4
HOWARD: Yeah, but aren't

31
25
MARSHA: I'm going to keep this

there members of the group // participating?

BETTY: Okay, okay

19
5
STEPHEN: Yeah, but obviously if there no Temple conference, then ..

Eye Gaze Listing for Above

Stephen

1. off camera
2. to Barry/Marsha/Betty
3. to Howard
4. head sweep from left to right, looking out over group
5. to Howard

Howard

11. off camera
12a. in general direction of Barry/Marsha/Betty
12b. head sweep to left, i.e., to Barry
13 to Stephen

Ken

16. off camera
17. to Barry/Marsha/Betty
18. brief look to Howard, then back as in 17
19. to Howard/Stephen

Marsha

22. down at papers on her lap, then to Betty
23. to Barry
24. down at papers on her lap
25. briefly to Betty, then down at papers on her lap

Betty

27. down at her lap
28. to Marsha
29. to Barry
30. to center of table in front of her, then down at her lap
31. to Marsha

Barry

39. to coffee table in front of him
40. to Marsha/Ken
41. down at table
42. to Howard/Stephen

As Marsha says "...got all the applications...," Howard interrupts with "You mean the whole conference?". From this point on, as indicated by the transcription convention of the double columns, there are two subconversations simultaneously constructed.

In this example, a transition-relevance point, the point in conversation in which speaker changes occur, is presumably reached after Barry's second

turn at talk. I have indicated this with a single star above. At this point, two individuals (Marsha and Howard) self-select and begin to vie for the one right to speak. Barry has finished speaking, and is looking at Marsha during the completion of his turn (continuation of point 40). His turn at this moment is a response to a question just asked by Marsha: "When will they know?" Based on Barry's visual orientation (cf. Duncan, 1972) and the fact that he has just followed up a question specifically initiated by Marsha for him, we might say that Marsha has now been yielded (or returned) the speaking turn by Barry. However, Barry does not verbally select Marsha to hold the floor next, and Marsha's statement initiates a topic different from Barry's. For these reasons, Marsha may be considered either a self-selector or an "other"-selected by Barry. In any case, she and Howard begin the construction of their respective turns at approximately the same time (Howard comes in about a second later).

Sacks and his co-workers (1974) suggest that, given the possibility of such simultaneous self-selections, there must be repair mechanisms to rectify one possible negative outcome of this, i.e., prolonged simultaneous talk by the self-starters. These writers therefore suggest that simultaneous turns may be resolved when one of the speakers falls prematurely silent, i.e., does not complete the talk of his/her turn. They write: ". . . The basic device for repairing 'more than one at a time' involves a procedure which is itself otherwise violative in turn-taking terms, namely stopping a turn before its possible completion point . . ." (1974: 724). In previous research, I have noted that the simultaneous speaker who receives no visual contact from the other participants carries out this repair work, i.e., falls silent or prematurely terminates his/her turn (Sigman, 1978). This visual (and postural) orientation does not yield a turn, rather it designates or specifies a next speaker. It should be noted, however, that this repair mechanism does not seem to be employed by either Howard or Marsha, or the others co-present. Instead, a state of simultaneous talk by the two individuals is initiated, and, once initiated, it is contributed to with verbalizations by the other participants (Betty and Barry with Marsha, Stephen with Howard).

Entry into a state of fission may thus be seen as an alternative to the repair mechanism described by Sacks for the situation of two simultaneous self-selectors. In the above example, two individuals simultaneously start

the construction of a turn. Rather than one of the speakers falling silent, both continue their turns and are eventually responded to by those assuming the role of listener (multiple turn-designation). Let us see how fission is accomplished in more detail.

Marsha has begun to ask her question just after Barry's turn. Barry and Marsha are posturally oriented to each other, and, as noted above, it appears as if Barry has yielded his previous turn to Marsha. At this time also, Barry, Betty, Ken and Stephen are also oriented visually to Marsha (on the eye gaze chart, numbers 2, 17, 28, and 40). At the beginning of his sentence, "You mean the whole conference. . .?", Howard's face appears to be in the direction somewhere between Barry and Marsha; immediately after "mean" he moves it slightly to his left, in the direction of Barry (number 12b). Marsha's statement is directed primarily at Barry. Howard also appears to be trying to gain the attention of this immediately preceding turn-possessor. Howard's statement is, in fact, a request for clarification based on Barry's previous turn. Barry remains visually oriented to Marsha during Howard's interruption. Instead of falling silent, however, Howard directs his eye gaze away from Barry and toward the participant to his immediate right (number 13). In then saying "or just," Howard lowers his voice and seems to project his voice in the direction of Stephen (as opposed to the larger group). Stephen moves his left shoulder closer to Howard. Also, on the eye gaze chart, Stephen and Howard establish reciprocal visual contact at almost the same time, i.e., at points 3 and 13, respectively. Stephen follows up on the topic initiated by Howard, "leaving" the topic being discussed by Marsha and Betty. Stephen first offers a clarification to Howard (i.e., it is the Temple conference being referred to) and then the two of them continue with the talk topics sustained by Howard's questions. As the eye gaze chart indicates, Howard maintains visual position no. 3 (visual direction to Stephen) throughout their talk; Stephen looks briefly to the entire group at no. 4, but otherwise maintains fairly constant eye direction to Howard (numbers 3 and 5).

It can be seen that simultaneity of talk is a necessary but not sufficient condition in the process of successful fission. In addition to simultaneous speech, both simultaneous speakers must be provided with an audience, i.e., each must receive a turn-designation signal. I will discuss each of these various points in turn.

In the above example, the formation of the two subconversations results when simultaneous turn-requesting (or self-selection) is met by multiple turn-designation. In contrast with this simultaneous or immediate fission, there are also instances of what can be considered gradual fission. This second type of fission occurs when, within the larger group, a smaller subgroup comprising two (or more) speakers is formed for several seconds, i.e., two or more participants are visually and posturally oriented only to each other over an extended time during the interaction, and then a second subgroup forms. That is, an "outsider" to this first group may attempt (1) to join this subgroup, or (2) to engage a fellow "outsider" in talk, or (3) to form another break-away group with a subgroup "insider." Fission results whenever this outsider establishes a state of talk with at least one other, while some of the members of the first subgroup remain talking. The progression in this case is that of one subgroup of the larger conversation gradually followed by another.

The initial simultaniety of talk establishes an invitation to fission. In the example, the question posed by Howard serves to invite at least one other participant to join him in talk. Initially, Howard does not appear to be a "ratified" speaker for any of the other participants -- Barry (the previous turn-possessor) is posturally oriented to Marsha, and all others are visually oriented to her as well. I would suggest that complete fission results once Stephen has oriented to Howard and has provided some turn-designation signal, i.e., has accepted Howard as speaker. Prior to this, Howard is a speaker "in search of an auditor." Stephen provides ratification or acceptance by: (1) directing visual orientation away from Marsha and others, and in the direction of Howard; (2) posturally reorienting with Howard; and (3) providing a statement which clarifies the question being asked, and, at the same time, indicates that the question is being attended. At a minimum, acceptance of fission requires bodily orientation to the simultaneous speaker and may not require substantive talk.

Part of the invitation to fission may involve a search by the simultaneous speakers for the availability of listeners. There is an indication with this that one's turn is being constructed, not for the entire group, but for a subgroup. Even the speaker who is interrupted may check to see if he/she is being attended. This may involve postural and visual shifting and a modification of voice levels to accommodate other speakers. In

addition, one finds a series of false starts until the speaker receives a turn-designation. That is, speakers stammer through the first syllables of their utterances while searching for potential listeners.

The tentative behavior units and functions associated with fission may be summarized in the following manner:

A. SIMULTANEITY OF TALK ("INVITATION")
   1. immediate fission
      a. simultaneous self-selection by two individuals

   or

      b. interruption of current speaker (no existing subgroup)

   or

   2. Gradual fission (in the case of a subset of interactions engaged only with each other -- "insiders" -- to the apparent exclusion of remaining group members -- "outsiders")
      a. current speaker interrupted by outsider directing utterance to another outsider

   or

      b. current speaker interrupted by outsider directing utterance to an insider

B. SEARCH FOR LISTERNER AVAILABILITY (OPTIONAL)
   Some or all of the simultaneous speakers (i.e., not only the interruptor) will attempt to make visual contact and/or gain postural orientation with non-speakers.

C. VOICE LEVEL FLUCTUATIONS (OPTIONAL)
   1. The interruptor may attempt to gain attention by raising/lowering volume

   and/or

   2. The interrupted may accommodate to the voice level of the other simultaneous speaker(s)

D. ACCEPTANCE
   The listener(s) will signal availability of additional "floors" (turn-designate) and acknowledge the fission invitation by any combination of the following:
   1. orienting visual/posturally to one of the simultaneous speakers

2. verbally contributing to the topic initiated by the turn of one of the simultaneous speakers
3. verbally (vocally) indicating that the simultaneous speaker should continue (e.g., using buffers)

In summary, this paper has demonstrated a preliminary organization to conversational fission, and, in so doing, has implied that dyadic turn-taking models must be revised in order to take account of turn simultaneously in non-dyadic conversations. Fission is an interesting yet unexplored domain for interaction scholars. Its appeal to interactionists derives, in part, from the fact that fission is multi-systemic: the processes by which speaker/hearers manage multiple subconversations (and then wholly merged conversations) involves the study of the interdependencies of the turn-taking system, topic negotiation, utterance functions, etc. Moreover, these concepts argue against the a prioristic assumption of verbal hegemony in interaction with the related consideration that the right to speak is inherently limited rather than interactionally controlled and negotiated. Further work is clearly called for.

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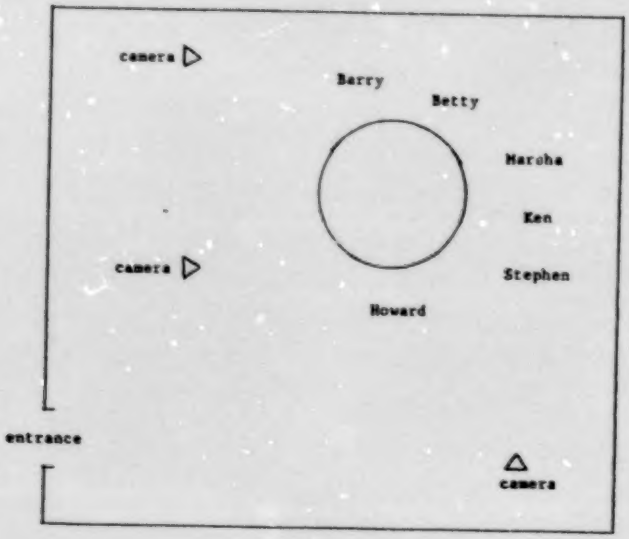

Seating arrangement. ERG tape (Fission/fusion analysis)